

THE POWER OF GOD

*Rev Jim Allan
Camrose United Church
16 May 2004*

Psalm 28:6-9 - My strength is in the Lord

Ephesians 6:10-17 - Be strong in the Lord

It's so exciting to be able to celebrate the baptism of two wonderful children here today, and in that to celebrate our baptism--the baptism of all of us--which is our inclusion in this body of Christ and this great heritage of faith that we have. In the readings from scripture today we have a picture of the empowerment and the protection of this faith of ours which is something that we all long for at many different levels, from the very external all the way to the most inner depths of our hearts.

So what I want to talk about today is the power of God at a very deep level of the inner experience of our lives, that place where we in our lives can feel powerless or threatened or unsafe in the world; and to consider what it is that really gives us that deep sense of safety and the power to live our lives as we wish, as we are led, as we are guided. So we have this picture of the armour of God. Now that's a very militaristic image, isn't it--putting on the breastplate of faith and all that sort of thing, this picture of being armoured and armed. Some people are uncomfortable using those militaristic images as expressions of our faith. But there is another twist on that that I want to share with you. When that kind of imagery is used biblically, it's not simply an affirmation of the militaristic view of life. As a matter of fact it's actually an argument against it. It's saying we have armies with armour and weapons to keep ourselves safe or secure, or to advance our power in some way. But it's actually saying, you know, that it's all really an illusion because real power or real security is about none of that. The real power and security that we need in our lives is the spiritual breastplate and the spiritual armour and sword. These are things that we find within ourselves and in relationship with God. That's where real empowerment comes in.

And that is so much at the heart of what is happening, and what we are struggling with, in the world today. The most recent example is the United States of America in Iraq right now. What's really going on there? Well, underneath, what I see is a deeper question in the entire world, because people around the world are watching what is happening in Iraq. It's that deeper question of asking whether we actually achieve global or national security by military power, by establishing control. That has been the underlying question and debate all along. We're living at a time in the history of the world when the military mode of power has so utterly failed to provide the world with the security we seek. Our weapons have become the greatest threat to our security, so that the world as a whole is looking more deeply than ever before for a source of security that is somehow beyond, or deeper, or that transcends, military armour. In other words, the

world is seeking some kind of “spiritual armour”--which is the way I think a lot of the biblical imagery is used--that will give us the sense of empowerment and safety that we want in our world. And the search is on. Where do we find that? I’m not going to make a whole sermon about international politics. This is just as much about our own individual lives as it is about life on a global scale.

I was talking with a friend today and somehow our conversation got around to the story of the Wizard of Oz--putting on all these things that give us lots of power, and safety, like armour. But in the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy has these ruby slippers that she wears, slippers which have a magic to them, and throughout the story she comes to depend on the protection of these magical slippers as she sets off on her great quest to confront the wicked Witch of the West. Those of you who know the story of the Wizard of Oz will fill in many more details. But Dorothy’s quest is to get back home. And so the whole story is focussed generally around all the things that she has to do and accomplish and achieve in order to get back home. In the end she discovers that all she needs to get back home is right there on her feet, those little ruby slippers which were with her all along. So those slippers become a symbol of the spiritual armour, something that is already there, not only around us but within us.

And that’s the plot outline of ten thousand different stories, searching for some kind of fulfillment, looking for something outside ourselves--some wealth, some nobility, some fame, some achievement, some possession, some thing we think we need that has this magical power that will get us where we want to go--and then discovering in some way that all along it has been there in us, with us, already available to us. So Dorothy is able to get back home. I remember, when I was a youth, having a kind of vision poem type of thing that I wrote about a sense of what life is really about, what is the ultimate need or achievement in life, and it came to me as a picture of going home. So getting back home is that metaphorical picture of life lived with a sense of having come from some origin, some source, with some of that wonderful energy of the child, of the youth. Someone once said a baby is born with a complete and total sense of the presence of God, but that the baby immediately starts to lose that sense as it begins living its life, and that all of life is an endeavour to get that sense back. It’s like having been swept suddenly away from home by a tornado and then spending our whole life trying to find our way back home, back to that centre of life where there is the safety, the security, the power for which we all long. So Dorothy discovers that that has been there all along.

That bounces my mind over to another story about red shoes that I maybe shouldn’t share, but I will anyway. It’s a silly story. When I was a child my family was visiting with relatives at a cabin at the lake, and we went over to see their neighbours. I never knew these neighbours but I always remembered a funny little story. People keep goofy things at their cabins, and this woman had a pair of red shoes on the wall and a prostitution licence from Mexico City. And the story was marvellous. She had been vacationing in Mexico City. Mexico City is one of those cities where prostitution is legal, and prostitutes have to be licensed. There are restrictions and so on, and in a particular part of the town wearing red shoes is a symbol of a prostitute. Our friends’ neighbour just happened to be wearing red shoes that day and was curiously wandering through that part of town. She was arrested and charged with soliciting without a licence. The police were being really nasty, and took her down to the police station where she had

to pay a hefty fine or go to jail. But there was a third option which was simply to purchase a licence which hardly cost anything. So she purchased the licence, took it home, framed it, and put it on the wall of her cabin alongside her red shoes.

Prostitution has been a metaphor in our thinking, a metaphor for something that is just the opposite of what the ruby slippers were for Dorothy. It has been a metaphor for giving away our power. Each of us has an internal power to live life, and to prostitute oneself is a metaphor for giving away that power. In our culture we are encouraged, pushed, expected, in some ways even compelled, to give away our power in ten thousand different ways to ten thousand different authorities that have no right to our power. We give our power away to corporations and businesses that do business on our behalf on another side of the world, and that treat people in ways that none of us would ever treat anyone. We give our power away to politicians who are fools and don't deserve any authority at all. We give our power away to the crumbling of social values on the part of people who really don't have the ability even to think ethically, let alone deserve to be ethical leaders in our community. We give our power away to what appears to be necessary in order for us to be secure, necessary in order for us to keep up with everyone else who is organizing his or her life around the abuse of others for personal gain. We give our power away to gods that are no god, to authorities that deserve no authority.

So Jesus comes into this world of people who are so attuned to giving away their power, and he tries to show people how to reclaim that power. The giving away of our power happens also in our religion. When we adulate religious leaders in a fundamental way, or religious beliefs, we give our power away there as well. Maybe that's the most serious way in which we do that. People were ready in Jesus' time to give away their power to him, too. They said he was the Messiah, but he didn't step up on the pedestal and say, "Right, I'm the Messiah." He said "Don't say that to anybody." In many different ways Jesus refused to allow himself to be put in the position of being the recipient of everybody else's power, of some kind of high authority. In a way what Jesus was saying was "Yes, what you see in me is the presence of God, and the presence of God is the entire source and basis of my power. But I'm not here to take away your power; I'm here to serve you like a mirror to show you that that is in you, too." This is like Dorothy discovering that she had the power all along. Maybe the ultimate goal of our lifelong spiritual quest is to discover the sacred presence within us that is the true source of the power and security that we need, and to discover that that it's all we need. And the more we are able to let go of what we think are the external things that we think we need in order to keep secure, and the more we are able just to depend on that source of sacred power within us, the more deeply we sink into the true peace, the true inner peace for which we all long, for which we all strive throughout our lives.

I want to read one brief quotation from Riso and Hudson's *The Wisdom of the Enneagram*. One of the ways the authors talk about sacred presence is as essence. "Essence is real and is not simply an idea; in fact, it is the thing that is most real in existence, the very foundation of existence itself. People have associated this inner peace with the presence of God, which is manifesting itself at every moment, and which is available at every moment." And so we endeavour throughout our lives, in truly hearing the gospel message of Jesus Christ, to live hand in hand with that essence, that sacred

presence within us that is the true source of our security, and upon which we depend absolutely once we have let go of all of those external illusions of security.

So we turn to an old favourite hymn that expresses that sense to me: “I need thee every hour.” It’s not asking God to come along and change things in the world. It is just saying I need to have a sense of God’s presence with me at the centre of my being every hour, every moment, every day of my life; and as long as I have that sense of sacred presence constantly throughout my life I am absolutely secure. “I need thee every hour.”

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor